

LET'S PLAY INTO THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

Francesca Machì

University of Palermo (ITALY)

Abstract

The role of gaming as an extremely effective teaching tool with learners at every age has been already well acknowledged by authors from all over the world (Freddi, Huzinga, Bruner)

In the FL classroom the fundamental characteristic of the gaming approach is the turn over of the perspective that not only emphasizes the affective relationship that occurs between teacher and student in the teaching/learning process, but also underlines the centrality of the learner as the main actor in the learning process. Games in the classroom help create communicative and significant learning environments where attention to individuals or to special education needs, respect of the rules, cooperation, solidarity, overcoming of difficulties can grow and consolidate.

This kind of teaching method has got an educational worth not only with young learners who generally love playing. Whether it is true that children have their first contact with the world through games by which they learn to know themselves, the others and the environments around them, it is also true that motivation, challenge, ease connected to ludic activities, the "learning by doing" dimension, the freedom of moving and not sitting, etc, are all characteristics that make gaming teaching methods universally and transversally efficacious.

So it is extremely important that teachers, first, learn to make use of games in class, that means verifying the feasibility, adapting them to the target of learners and their specific needs and focusing on the goals. It is also important to give teachers enough materials to collect background information in order to draw up methodological strategies that make use of efficacious, supporting and inclusive tools for students with special need means, to teach/learn foreign languages.

On the basis of these considerations, the present work, fruit of an intense workshop activity supported for years in schools and academic courses of the University of Palermo, aims to present a grid of evaluation of the game as an inclusive teaching tool to be used in the foreign language classroom. The grid, constructed during the academic years 2013/2014 and 2014/2015, has been analysed, used and validated by students attending classes of Special Education and Teaching Methodology for Infant and Primary School, within the degree courses of Social Education and Primary Education at the University of Palermo. The aim is to provide a useful working tool for teachers who want to manage and organize a teaching inclusive course making use of games. Although conceived for the foreign language classroom, the grid is structured in order to fit to other subject areas.

Keywords: Gamification Teaching, Foreign.

1 THE LUDIC METHODOLOGY

The Ludic Methodology is an L2 teaching proposal that can be considered as one *modus operandi* that theoretically, refers to the humanistic-communicative language learning approach expressed by authors like Gattegno, Krashen and Asher at the beginning of the Sixties. This methodology in Italy has become to spring since the Nineties thanks to the eminent contribution of Giovanni Freddi. The basis of this methodology is the universal acquainted value of the play, that, in spite of what it is believed, represents the main factor of growing. In fact it is efficacious with learners of every age: children, adolescents even adults because it increases motivation and as consequence, leads at language achievements. Of course, the Ludic Methodology shouldn't be considered the only practice but a possible pathway to teach foreign language.

However at school, especially with children and teens a methodology based on games should be the basis of every learning activity. Everything should be taught as a game in order to upgrade learners' interest and motivation¹. In fact play is the main factor of growing and it is also the way through which a child internalizes reality. For what concern the Foreign Languages (FL) the ludic methodology

¹ Louise M.C.

identifies in the *ludicity* the fundamental condition for a solid, long lasting and deep language acquisition and for an education of the learner characterized by cooperation and solidarity ².

Through free plays and games the FL can be acquainted easily and naturally as it becomes a tool to carry out the play not the end of the activity. Using plays or games conducted in a playful setting, for didactic purposes, means to give learners the opportunity to face the study of the foreign language naturally and easily involving all their personal cognitive, affective, communicative and physical abilities in the process of learning. It also allows to overcome the difficulties due to physical or cognitive psychological gaps, thank to its inclusive and spurring nature.

The fundamental characteristic in the L2 classroom gaming approach is the turn over of the relational perspective that not only emphasizes the importance of a real affective relationship between teacher and student in the teaching/learning process, but also underlines the centrality of the learner as the main actor in the learning process. Games in the classroom contribute to create a communicative and significant learning environments where attention to individuals or to students with special education needs, respect of the rules, cooperation, solidarity, overcoming of difficulties can grow and consolidate.

Focusing on the centrality of the learner and his/her individual needs, the Ludic Methodology aims at being a efficient practice through which teacher can present the FL inputs to the classroom and make a significant, accessible, motivated practising of the language itself.

1.1 Game as animation

In spite of many theoretical contributions that affirm the importance of play in education, this practice at school has still having difficulties to consolidate as a worthy learning practice. The reason of that is a misunderstanding, that is, the identification of the time of teaching with work and study in opposition to the time of leisure characterized by easy activities, plays and by the use of toys and games. Another reason is the lack of specific competences by the teachers that can't handle with teaching methodologies alternative or complementary to the frontal lesson/teaching. While this methodology, whether well supported by a solid teaching skill, and suitable, appropriate work tools is to be considered as the best form through which L2 can be presented, discovered, manipulated, practised and acquired by learners.

Besides as the play is the best tool to educate because it is manifold and versatile, what gives force and value to it, is the role assumed by the educator/teacher who has to animate all those playful activities that can offer occasion of personal and cultural growth. For this reason it is interesting to linger on the word *anim-ation* that leads to the words *anima*, soul, also intended as energy, life, courage and *action*, ability of doing and or modifying the reality and producing measurable effects that means that the teacher, in a gaming prospective should become an animator who can animate all these playful activities in order to help students in their learning and growing processes³.

For these particular aspects, animation and play invest all the areas of Education at every stage of life. There is a challenge inside the play: on one end it leads to a change; doing something agreeable that involves all the senses, individuals tend to overcome their discomforts, their difficulties, unease. Play also leads to a stronger personal awareness, a resolution of emotional conflicts; on the other hand while plays a person has to face up with the searching of stability and preservation of his own continuity. From a didactic point of view, these aspects represent the dynamics that move to a meaningful learning of the FL.

1.2 Games and Plays

These are the main characteristics of plays and games

- Activity perceived as not anxiogen but pleasant.
- Use of materials and modalities typical of the game.
- Freedom of movement and action.

² Caon F. Rutka S. (22,23) 2004

³ Romano G.R, 2000

- Knowledge of the rules.
- Organization of participants into groups, teams or couple.
- Presence of the competition factor.

In the ludic teaching methodology, teacher has to transfer all these aspects to the learning activities in order to involve students and facilitate the language learning process.

It is very important to clarify this passage, as one thing is “to play at school” one other is to use play and games for didactics aims that means distinguish what is an educational activity based on play from what is a mere playful activity. In English this distinction is well expressed by the terms *play* and *game*, where “*play*” is the action of playing, free from any specific aim, while “*game*” is a playful oriented activity also characterised by rules⁴. Both are demanding activities because involve individuals physically, emotionally, cognitively; both are continuous and go along with individuals from their childhood to adulthood, but while play is aimless as it finishes in itself, a gaming activity has its aim in the didactic goals. For this reason from a didactic point of view what is important is to gamifying the learning activities in order to orient students to educational and linguistic outcomes⁵.

In this perspective, what is also central is the role of the teacher who has to have solid personal, pedagogical, linguistic competences in order to handle the classroom and find the resources with which playing into the L2 classroom.

Teacher has not only to prepare the activities, but he/she has to be a very good conductor of all the steps of the gaming teaching pathway, that means he/she must be able to mediate the different needs and request for help of the students, to adapt the activities to each student taking into account any possible specific. Cognitive or physical need, he/she has to make up the setting, to prepare the classroom to have a relaxed not anxiogen environment, coordinate all the activities and have clear his/her prefixed teaching goals.

1.3 What games in the L2 classroom?

In order to teach through games it is necessary that a teacher considers several factors such as the tools available, that are:

- Playing tools (that means the play in all this forms).
- Dramatization tools (simulating game, Role-play, fairy tales playing, story- telling, Overwhelmed Theatre, etc...)
- Creative and expressive forms of involvement (Songs, dances, Music, parties, culinary events, Art and Crafts).
- Multimedia and digital tools.

When a L2 teacher has to choose and adapt a game to the class he/she has to consider not only the age of the learners, their level of instruction, personal styles of learning, aptitudes, factors of motivation, specific individual needs, but also other important factors. First of all he/she must have perfectly clear the outcomes he/she wants to pursue and the strategies he/she intends to put into action in order to achieve them through the Ludic Methodology. Whatever game or playful activity can be used as a teaching tool, as long as it is functional to the aims and ends the teacher wants to pursue through it.

Teacher also needs to clearly know that there are some good criteria that occur in choosing the right game, that are: to verify that it allows measurable achievements; to adapt it to the starting level of instruction of the students and also to the L2 pre-requisites that students have before starting the gaming activity; to select a game that offers a wide range of playing roles so that all the class can take part to it; to give clear rules, to take note of the students behaviour during the activity; to take into account of the means, the context in which the activity will be done both for what concern the students and the classroom internal dynamics; to do games focused on the effective abilities of the players.

⁴ Callois R. 1961; Mc Gonigal 2013.

⁵ Caon F, Rutka S, 2004.

Regarding to this, there are two fundamental aspects that allow to carry out the game activity into the classroom: the feasibility of the game and the strategic involvement of the teacher.

Feasibility of the game means that it must be amusing, but at the same time that during the sequence of the game the linguistic aims should emerge. The game is feasible if it suits with the location and the psychological and relational setting in which it will be carried out. This should be friendly so that students can feel safe and at their ease, also no one should feel to be excluded. Another important aspect is that the players can move all around the space freely and that only the players stay into the classroom, without no one observer unrelated to the class which presence could involve an alteration of internal balance of the class and inhibitions in the students. It is important to remember that the ludic dimension implies what Krashen calls the lowering of the *affective filter*⁶ that is the emotional barrier that prevents from learning. The ludic dimension contributes to create a pleasant relaxed situation that reduces conflicts and spurs to do things, to overcome personal limits, to learn willingly without fear of failing.

For what concern the teacher, he/she must plays with students not let them play, he/she must keep an eye on all students, avoiding discouraging comments and maintain a correct emotional distance.

He/she can sit near the students, answer to requests for help, encourage them and arbitrate disputes that can spring up among the group of peers. He/she also has to give instruction and prepare the setting.

2 THE STUDY: A GAME GRID

On the basis of these considerations, the present work, fruit of an intense workshop activity supported for years in schools both with teachers on duty and with students attending classes of Language Teaching, FL Teaching Methodology and Special Education of the University of Palermo, aims to present a grid of evaluation of the game as an inclusive teaching tool to be used in the foreign language classroom.

The grid takes into account the main factors that occur in the teaching usage of games as educational tools. It wants to offer a support that schematically structures games as a teaching activity, allowing the teacher to have a repertory of planned teaching materials ready to be used into the Foreign Languages classroom and to evaluate students.

The grid has been administered during the training teacher courses both for Primary and Secondary School and to the aspirant teacher at the ordinary academic course of Educational Sciences. The game project, as we called, was composed by 5 parts.

In the first it was asked to write an introduction of the Ludic Methodology with references to the theoretical framework in which it is fitted; in the second part they had to choose two hypothetical classrooms and make the class profile.

This part was very important in order to focus on the learners and their needs and it was preliminary and fundamental to build up the game grid; in the third part we expected they choose tree different games that would have been adapted to the class according to the characteristics given by the profile; the fourth part was the building up of the game activities answering to the grid's descriptors. As long as they completed the grid they could have more information about how to carry out the game with specific L2 teaching aims.

The last part was a methodological reflection, aimed to make clear and motivating the teacher's chooses, their use as teaching tools, the period of the year where they intended to propose the game.

⁶Krashen S.D. 1983.

Here we present the Grid for the Pre-Pedagogical Analysis of the game:

Name of the game	
Categorization /classification of the game	
Game's Description/Framework	
Characteristics of the Game(Who it is fitted for , What abilities the game is useful for , Where it must be played , Why, When (in what period of the school year it can be proposed)	
Number of participants or groups involved	
Target Classroom	
CeFr Level	
Prerequisites Competences (in terms of reading, speaking, Writing, Listening)	
L2 Learning Goals:	
Prerequisites :Comunicative Functions	
PrerequisitesPrerequisite: Grammar	
Prerequisite: Vocabulary	
Cognitive , educational and Physical goals/ objectives	
Materials	
the setting	
Game's Steps : 1) Preparation (if necessary)	
Game's Steps : 2) Actuation, Presentation of the activity to the students - Instructions and Rules(expressed in few and clear words)	
Duration	
Role of the teacher	
Debriefing	
Check	

Fig. 1.

The descriptors are conceived to be progressive and to test the feasibility of the game in a teaching context. We start from the definition of the game according to the ontogenetic Classification of Claparède (1909) resumed by Piaget (1945). This passage is useful to focus on the functionality of the game selected as regard to the target and the objectives the teacher wants to achieve.

The following descriptors are about the definition of the class profile. Teacher who takes into account age, social context, personal attitudes, specific needs, way of learning, level of instruction, pre-requisites of his/her students can adapt the game to the demands of the class in order to make it an efficacious and accurate teaching tool. When we started to test the grid we noticed that generally, aspirant teachers or students had more difficulties to define the class profile, maybe because of their lack of experience. That's the reason why we decided to administer the grid only to teachers on duty at school or to University students that have already done their period of training at school.

There are then six descriptors (materials, setting, game's steps, duration, role of the teacher) concerning to the game itself and the ability of the teacher to animate and conduct it, organise it remembering that he /she has to play with students not let them play!

The last two descriptors (debriefing and check) concern with the post-game phase. That is very important especially with adults or adolescent learners, because it is the meta-cognitive phase where students are called to think about what they have learnt and the way in which they have learnt. It is a very delicate passage because after the gaming dimension they are called to a reflexive moment.

As we can see in the following grid the Kim game has been chosen for its simplicity, as the target is a class of children of 7/8 years and can be carried out even in presence of SEN students.

Name of the game	KIM
Categorization /classification of the game	Memory Game
Game's Description/Framework	Individual and calm. Children have to watch carefully for two minutes the school objects that laying on the desk that will be covered soon after . Children have to correctly write as many of the objects they can remember. Wins who can remember and write correctly the all objects.
Characteristics of the Game(Who, What the game is useful for , Where , Why, When	This game develops mnemonic abilities/skills, gives L2 inputs and is useful to revise the school vocabulary. Besides it can be a good exercise for students with Dyslexia because it allows to improve writing and phonological abilities. This activity can be proposed at the end of the D.U.
Number of participants or group involved	All the classroom even subject with
Target Classroom	Children of 7/8 years old of 3rd class of the Primary School
Cefr Level	A1
Prerequisites Competences (in terms of reading, speaking, Writing, Listening)	Pupils have a basic vocabulary repertory and know single words and expressions related to "School objects " . They can write single words. The can divide into syllables the words. The can understand basic instructions and simple question giving short answer.
Linguistic Goals:	Consolidate the <i>School/ object</i> vocabulary
Pre-requisites :Communicative Functions	Identify objects: What is This / What is That?
Pre-requisites Grammar	There Is – There are; possessive adjectives
Pre- requisites :Vocabulary	School Objects- colours- main common verbs
Cognitive , Educational and Physical Goals/ Objectives	Practice Memory; Respect for the rules; Improve sensorial tactile ability;
Material	School Objects – 1 cover
The setting	A big desk in the middle of the room all the children make a circle around the table so that every body can see clearly what is laid on it.
Game's Steps : 1) Preparation	The teacher prepares the desk putting on it 10 different school objects , gives a sheet of paper and coloured felt-pen to each student.
Game's Steps : 2) Actuation Presentation of the activity to the students. Introduction and rules of the games	The teacher says: There are 10 classroom object on my desk. Look at them carefully for 2 minutes. Memorize them. Then write on your the sheet . You have five minutes. Wins the person who can remember and write the all object that are on the table .
Duration	1 h
Role of the teacher	Conductor and Controller,
Debriefing	Teacher discovers the desk and ask children to name each objects present on the table then. Asks who want to write on the blackboard the names so everybody can check their list.
Check	At home students have to write in a list of sentences, all the objects that are in their schoolbag and pencil-case starting with "in my schoolbag there are../there is...; in my pencil case there are/ there is

Fig. 2.

It is thought to be proposed at the end-of the first-term as an activity of vocabulary empowerment and improving of speaking and writing abilities.

3 CONCLUSION

What we noticed as a result of the administration of the grid is that the more experienced are the teachers the more able they are to identify the learning objectives and to plan the check and revision activities.

While University Students and young teachers are more interested in experiment the teaching potentiality of the games and also to experiment the way in which the foreign language can practised, used, discovered, manipulated by playing with it.

In conclusion we noticed that as long as the grid is well structured according to the given descriptors, it makes easier the carrying out of the gaming activities in the Foreign Language classroom, provides new teaching material clear and ready to share with colleagues, and at the same time it is a tool through which teacher has the opportunity to think over the issues concerning teaching and to focus on those factors that improve the teaching performance causing inclusion and significant life –long achievements.

In this way the grid conceived for the L2 classroom activities can be used by teachers of other subject areas that want to practice the gaming methodology.

Further implications and developments of this study will be made known at the end of my PhD doctoral period after a new series of experimentations and validations that will take place with children at school in Italy, in Germany and Spain next year.

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